Hutchins's idea of a university

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William H. McNeill
HUTCHINS' UNIVERSITY
A memoir of the University of Chicago, 1929–1950
194pp. University of Chicago Press; distributed in the UK by Hemel Hempstead: IBD. £19.95.
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Mary Ann Dzuback
ROBERT M. HUTCHINS
Portrait of an educator
387pp. University of Chicago Press; distributed in the UK by Hemel Hempstead: IBD. £19.95.
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Robert Hutchins, who was President, later Chancellor, of the University of Chicago from 1929 until 1951, is an almost forgotten figure in the United States and was hardly, if at all, known in Europe. He was one of those American types who provoke smiles in Europeans, a high-minded reformer with a whiff of evangelism. Education was his calling, and, as with so many Americans, he seemed to wish to remake the world in a day and to give us instant access to all the best things this civilization has produced; whereas the Old World with its ancestral universities, proud and rooted in their 800-year-old traditions, tend to assume you have to be to the manor born. In particular, Hutchins was preoccupied with liberal education, a kind of education almost unrecognizable to the English, French and Germans whose public schools, *lycées* and gymnasiums are meant to educate their students in the classics before they enter the university to specialize.

In spite of all this, I agree with the authors of these two books about him that Hutchins is an educator who deserves the attention of Europeans as well as Americans, not only because he was the only American university president in this century who made a serious intellectual effort to understand the place of the Greek and the biblical heritage – which was the core of European education – in the lives of Americans, but also, and more importantly, because he was a man who was instinctively attuned to the crisis in everyone's relation to that heritage, a crisis of which we are only too well aware now.

Hutchins was the promoter of the Great Books, a P. T. Barnum-like formulation which offends the ear of the tasteful. His advocacy only served to isolate him among the professors and embarrass the University of Chicago among its peers. The natural scientists understood themselves to be progressive and had little interest in the old classics in their field, such as Galileo and Newton, who were no longer of any real relevance to what they were doing. The new social scientists hoped that by rejecting the old theorists they would appear to be progressive too and persuade the public that they also had made significant scientific discoveries. The humanists, to whom the custody of the Great Books was assigned, were mostly dissecting them philologically with the latest methods and hardly considered being inspired by them or living according to them.

Despite the failure of his attempt to reform the university as a whole in such a way that it would address the "great questions", and undergraduates would read "great books", Hutchins still exercises a certain fascination, as witnessed by the fact that there have been several books about him in the past few years. These new works by William H. McNeill and Mary Ann Dzuback were inspired by the University of Chicago's centennial celebration taking place this year. "Centennial?!" any good European would exclaim. How can you have a history in a mere 100 years? When Hutchins arrived in Chicago in 1929 as a reformer, he was trying to reform what had existed for only thirty-seven years. His university was the merest of babies, not only in comparison to Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge and all the others, but also to the universities of the eastern United States which had been founded more than 200 years earlier. He remained in Chicago for twenty-one years and departed leaving nothing behind but a warm afterglow. That's institutional continuity in America. The interest in Hutchins may be connected with the fact that his Great Books are now almost officially considered to be the foundation of the "hegemonic structures of white western males", or of Eurocentrism. Hutchins represents the unabashed advocacy of what for today's American humanists are the causes of elitism, sexism, racism and homophobia, as well as colonialism and a host of other ills. He is the forbidden charm as surely as was Epicurus for Jews and Christians in the healthy flower of their faith. He is a good reminder of a vanishing breed at a time when humane letters in the United States are in a silly season, to be taken, not as belonging to serious intellectual discourse but as one of those wondrous American sociological phenomena like prohibition which scandalize and amuse foreigners.

Hutchins had ideas and a point of view, but they would have brought him little attention if he had not been such a striking personality. He assumed the presidency of the University of Chicago before his thirtieth birthday, after having served as dean of the Yale Law School for two years. He had rare good looks. There was hardly a movie star, not to speak of university professors or administrators, who could rival him in this respect. His manner was sovereign, and he spoke with both wit and feeling. He was a debunker of American society, especially its universities, in a way that reminded one of vigorous social critics such as H. L. Mencken, yet his rhetoric was informed with an undeniable moral and intellectual gravity. He was almost the only university president whose discourse could be listened to. Most university presidents, and this is more and more the case, never think about what it means to educate or to be educated. That is left to the various specialities, and the presidents have neither the inclination nor the self-confidence to think about what it's all for. Mostly they are concerned about money and hiring the scientists and scholars desired by each of the separate departments within the university, or they are trying to square their universities with the latest political movements. Hutchins squabbled with the established fields and their eminent researchers about what knowledge is, and he compelled them, frequently while angering them, to speak about the presuppositions of their disciplines, which they themselves rarely elaborated or questioned.

It was quite a spectacle to see a university engaged in public discourse about itself and what it should be doing. All this was frequently accompanied by poignant self-criticism by Hutchins himself, who was aware of his limitations. There was something heroic in his opposition to the stale conventions of an intellectual world empty and shot through with hypocrisy. In short, he had a divination of what philosophy once meant: the queen of the sciences, which ruled and determined the status of the parts within the whole. Or, to put it another way, the study of the Socratic question, "What is the good life?", seemed to him to be the natural vocation of what he called the higher learning. Although he was a great believer in democracy, he did not think the sciences could be organized democratically – one discipline, one vote – with philosophy just another speciality.

The problem with these two books is that, although both authors are interested in the man Hutchins, neither has any sympathy with his ideas or takes them seriously. William McNeill is a well-known historian, the author of *The Rise of the West*; he was a student and later a professor at the University of Chicago during Hutchins's time and after, and his father was a professor in the university's Divinity School. He therefore speaks with personal experience of this period; not so, however, Mary Ann Dzuback, a young professor of education, whose book is a reworking of her doctoral dissertation, and displays the special defects of that exercise. Neither presents Hutchins as the leader of an important intellectual debate. Thus, these writers are reduced to recounting the parochial history of the University of Chicago – hardly a design for engaging the attention of a wider public. Professor Dzuback is utterly beneath the issues and is reduced to recounting the details of Hutchins's career, which can only be of interest to people who already know a lot about him and recognize that he is somehow important. Whenever she feels constrained to explain what appear to her to be perverse positions adopted by Hutchins, she reverts to things like his alleged longing for the simplicity of the Middle Ages or to his puritanical forebears with their moral certitudes – certitudes which were shaken in him. She simply does not know enough to give an adequate account of the serious motives behind Hutchins's words and deeds.

Much the same is unfortunately true of McNeill's memoir, but then he is a person of greater learning and broader experience. Hutchins intrigues and irritates him, but he almost never stops to question his own assumptions. Hutchins's distaste for the Divinity School's dedication to the Higher Criticism – which reduced what were once considered to be the revealed texts to garbled compendia of diverse human sources without ever taking seriously their claim to be revelations – seems pathological to McNeill. He is sublimely unaware that the latest and most powerful thinking about the Bible denies the validity of the Higher Criticism, which goes back to Spinoza, and that the leading theologians of the twentieth century come much closer to what Hutchins believed than to what McNeill believes. McNeill is very nineteenth-century while thinking he is very up to date. For Hutchins, the revealed text gives us, for example, the Ten Commandments, and the only interesting questions are whether these commandments are the core of human duty and whether obedience to them is really sanctioned by God. If you can't address these urgent questions to the Bible, then you must look elsewhere for answers to them. It is trivial to send armies of archaeologists looking for manuscripts or other remains when you have no expectation of finding the most needful things. This is common sense and requires none of the explanations about Hutchins's longing for simple certitudes because he was unable to live as resolutely as our authors in their lack of certitude think they do.

McNeill attributes to Hutchins vitality, courage and methodological innovations in teaching, but he, like the specialist he is, is constitutionally incapable of approaching the insights that made such innovations compelling for Hutchins. He makes his book ridiculous by continual laments for the loss of football at the University of Chicago, an activity which Hutchins thought had nothing to do with a university and which he abolished in 1939.

Both authors echo the fashionable view that Hutchins's list of books – which includes what any civilized Englishman would expect: Aristotle, Locke, Shakespeare, Marx, etc – is a narrow, exclusive "canon" dictated by elites and excludes non-Western and other kinds of diverse voices. Now, everything about Hutchins is epitomized in the expression "Great Books", and if you are a victim of these tiresome and demagogic clichés current about the canon, you cannot even begin to talk about Hutchins. He knew that he himself needed teachers and that the teachers he could

encounter in the flesh were probably epigones of greater teachers who lived only in books. He felt a need to associate himself with the greatest teachers about questions which troubled him, questions concerning how he ought to live. Critics of his view take it for granted that for us such teachings are either false or irrelevant. That is the issue. It is perhaps the greatest intellectual issue of our time, and those who are so certain about the limitations of those books know beforehand that they are not serious. McNeill simply cannot imagine how a modern man without some deep vice of soul could be attracted to Thomas Aquinas, who presented a profound and comprehensive teaching about the nature of things, and, above all, addressed himself to the most critical of problems, reason versus revelation. The notion that Thomas might be superior to any modern thinkers is simply implausible to McNeill.

Scientific specialization and history are the two issues concerning which McNeill takes particular exception to Hutchins. The University of Chicago's first president, William Rainey Harper, was a distinguished Higher Critic who founded the university in imitation of the great German universities after the Humboldt reform. He dedicated the University of Chicago to graduate study, with great emphasis on the progress of the specialized disciplines, particularly those of the natural sciences. This was a new departure and a break with the American tradition, with its concentration on the moral and intellectual formation of its undergraduates. And Chicago, from the very beginning, did fulfil this vocation. This institution, an instant product, founded with

the money of John D. Rockefeller and sustained by Chicago millionaires in the shadow of the famous stockyards, was from the outset a world-class university. Its physicists were among the first Nobel Prize winners, and it remains best known for the first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction and the subsequent building of the bomb achieved by its scientists under the leadership of Enrico Fermi and James Franck, as well as for the Chicago school of economics. The men who led these schools were consummate specialists whose achievements intimidated and silenced most critics. Neither McNeill nor Dzuback seems aware that Hutchins was really an anti-Harper, an extreme critic of specialization and one who doubted the coherence of the intellectual vision of these specialists and the moral goodness of the progress of science.

The Harper university was pure Enlightenment. Hutchins, while not denying the dignity of Enlightenment, had the kinds of reservations about it first given voice by Rousseau and more and more prevalent among serious thinkers in the twentieth century. For Hutchins, the "value question" was dominant, and he doubted whether the university could any longer shed light on what a good man or a good society might be. He expressed more profoundly the problem which was formulated a few years later as the problem of "the two cultures". He badgered the scientists, insisting that they talk about these questions, and tried to organize the departments in such a way that they would inevitably do so. For him, Aristotle and Aquinas were, at the very least, models for such an undertaking, and still defensible on their own grounds. He was a David challenging the Goliath, the most powerful and respected forces in modern intellectual life. Many great scientists and scholars regarded him as an insolent and incompetent critic. An intellectual nobody with no specific learning, he undertook to discipline internationally famous specialists whose contributions were undeniable. Both of our authors take the side of this establishment without even trying to make a case for Hutchins's quest for the unity of knowledge and of the university. Hutchins was a metaphysician, they believe, a human type as outdated as the alchemist.

As for history, McNeill believes that again Hutchins was simply prejudiced against that great discipline, which for McNeill is really the compendium of wisdom about human things. He does not accept, or perhaps does not know of, the distinction between history and historicism. Political history, the study of the struggles of men and nations for freedom and empire, as practised by Thucydides or Gibbon, was of great interest to Hutchins, and works of such men were part of his curriculum. It is intellectual history about which Hutchins had doubts. The assertion of intellectual historians is that philosophy and the whole of intellectual life are essentially historical. Hutchins believed in the possibility of a natural intellectual horizon within which the important questions are always accessible and hence beyond history. Books for him were to be approached from the point of view of truth and falsehood and not that of historical context. Historicism is a philosophical thesis and does not emerge out of the study of history but rather directs history to new kinds of studies. Hutchins thought that this philosophical thesis was interesting, and that Hegel and its other important proponents were proper parts of his Great Books list. He did not, however, dogmatically accept the assertions of historicism because those assertions rob the books of their independence and their claim to teach the truth. This is an interesting and important debate, but most historians take historicism to be true and not a subject for debate. Hutchins was most concerned with making life and the university a great and continuing discussion about the good life, and he saw that the intellectual historians had no such concern.

What is perhaps most striking about Hutchins is that, on the basis of an intellectual position that in Europe is associated with snobbism, conservatism and mere traditionalism, he was an unabashed and unwavering democrat and egalitarian. He took the noble view of democracy and insisted that the participation of all required that all be educated on the highest level and be able to make rational decisions concerning the public interest. He had no doubt, and this was perhaps quixotic on his part, that everyone could be so educated. Without it, democracy would be mob rule, catering to uninformed prejudice and preference. Great Books are not, as is now alleged, elitist, but rather the foundation of a free society. The fact that most of them were not written by Americans did not bother him. Thought is universal and is ready for the use of all anywhere and at any time. He was an utterly American fellow and was in the business of providing champagne for the people.

Hutchins was not a highly educated man, and everything he did came from a generous spirit and the amazing instinct of which I have spoken. That instinct put him, unawares, at one with some of the profoundest philosophical thought of the past century. His philosophical pitch was not sufficiently high to come anywhere near solving the tension between scientific necessity and human freedom or "the value question". This had the result of attracting to him associates who were clever but superficial gadflies and virtuosi of facile methods and syntheses. Unfortunately, the "two cultures" problem seems to leave us the choice of narrow competence or generalized hot air, and Hutchins's contempt for the university establishment inclined him to too much sympathy with the latter. He did not sufficiently contemplate the possibility of being both precise and synoptic, as were thinkers like Hume and Kant. In this he was more a symptom of our intellectual situation than a solution to it. But he was always better than any of those who associated themselves with him. He could be foolish, but he was always directing us all to the great task of correcting our ignorance concerning the most important things.

And there was one aspect of his public life, a consequence of all these convictions and aspirations of which I have spoken, that no university person failed to appreciate. He more successfully than anyone defended the universities from the assaults launched against them during the various "red scares". He never gave an inch or fled from the attackers. He not only stood up against them, he humiliated and ridiculed them in such a way that they retreated bloodied. His high intelligence, his piercing wit, and his eloquence were marshalled without reserve against such persons, and his responses to them were repeated everywhere with laughter. He was so certain that the university was the highest and best thing in America that no consideration of vulgar prudence could deter him. In what was perhaps his greatest success in this domain, he humiliated the owner of a chain of drug stores who announced he was withdrawing his niece from the University of Chicago because she was being made a Communist, and who incited the state legislature to undertake an investigation of subversive activity at the university. Under Hutchins's instruction, he became ashamed of himself, and finally endowed a series of lectures which culminated in important books by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss. At Chicago, every professor felt safe from the attacks of petty moralism and political extremism, and we owed it all to this man. It was wonderful to be led by such a generous spirit who was not a petty bureaucrat but who was trying to think about the same questions that all educated persons within the university should be concerned with.

I feel about Hutchins a little of what Stendhal, writing in the world of the decayed and contemptible bourgeoisie, felt about Napoleon. Hutchins and his project for the universities are still worth contemplating inasmuch as he makes such an unashamed case for books, and reduces the depressing disproportion between ideal and reality in the universities. Unfortunately, no one could undertake such contemplation on the basis of the two books under review. In order to hear his voice, which is not reproduced in them, I would suggest that you read Hutchins himself and begin with *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, 1936).

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